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Abstract

Does electoral fraud stabilize authoritarian rule or undermine it? The answer to this question rests, in part, on how voters evaluate regime candidates who engage in fraud. Using a survey experiment conducted after the 2016 elections in Russia, we find that voters withdraw their support from ruling party candidates who commit electoral fraud. This effect is especially large among strong supporters of the regime. Core regime supporters are more likely to have ex ante beliefs that elections are free and fair. Revealing that fraud has occurred significantly reduces their propensity to support the regime. These findings illustrate that fraud is costly for autocrats not just because it may ignite protest, but also because it can undermine the regime's core base of electoral support. Because many of its strongest supporters expect free and fair elections, the regime has strong incentives to conceal or otherwise limit its use of electoral fraud.

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Does electoral fraud stabilize authoritarian rule or undermine it? On one hand, electoral fraud may help the regime "win" elections and signal strength to elites (Simpser, 2013; Rozenas, 2016). This view suggests that manufacturing dominant electoral victories deters potential challengers. But electoral fraud also carries a clear set of risks. Fraud can serve as a focal point around which the opposition can organize mass protests, as the Colored Revolutions clearly demonstrate (Tucker, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011).

However, fraud holds another liability for autocrats that is underappreciated: it can undermine popular support for the authorities, even among those who back the regime. In this paper, we examine how voters in contemporary Russia respond when they find out that the regime is manipulating elections. We argue that because voters view fraud as morally inappropriate, they disapprove of its use and withdraw support from candidates that use it.

The effects of increasing awareness of electoral fraud are largest among core regime supporters. In electoral authoritarian regimes, regime partisans are more likely to believe ex ante that elections are conducted fairly. This can happen for a number of reasons. Regime supporters are more exposed (and possibly susceptible) to regime propaganda, and partisanship biases may inhibit the internalization of rumors about fraud. Alternatively, they may support the regime precisely *because* they believe it is holding free and fair elections. Given these pre-conceived notions, the regime's core supporters will be most likely to punish regime incumbents when fraud is revealed to them. By contrast, swing or weakly aligned voters are already skeptical about electoral integrity. Hence, the revelation of fraud will do less to affect their vote choice. Expectations of electoral fraud are already factored in for these voters.

To test these claims, we conducted a framing experiment through the 2016 Russian Election Study, a nationally representative survey following that year's State Duma election. The survey experiment randomly prompted respondents to evaluate a hypothetical United Russia (UR) candidate who was known to have engaged in different types of fraud and then asked them to rate their likelihood of voting for the candidate. We find that all types of electoral fraud—ballot-box fraud, vote buying, and intimidation—reduce support for the UR candidate.

Using data from the same survey, we report several other findings in support of our main arguments. First, the vast majority of Russians express moral disapproval of electoral fraud, regardless of their affinity for the regime in power. Second, a surprisingly large share of Russians believe that elections are held honestly, and more importantly for this study, regime supporters are much more likely to believe that elections are free and fair. Finally, we find that learning about fraud by UR candidates produces a much larger reduction in support among strong regime backers than it does among weakly aligned voters. We conclude that if information on fraud were to become widespread in Russia, the size of Putin's electoral coalition would diminish significantly. We replicate these findings with a second survey experiment conducted in Russia in May 2018, which also examines how an individual's likelihood of voting depends on perceptions of fraud.

Our findings demonstrate that excessive use of fraud can destabilize autocracy not just because it leads to mass protest, but also because it erodes the regime's electoral base. Some recent accounts suggest the opposite. For instance, Svolik (2020) argues that regime supporters in polarized societies will endorse illiberal acts if it helps their party defeat the opposition. Our experiments suggest this is not the case in Russia: polarization is not strong enough that regime supporters are willing to excuse regime candidates for fraud. Instead, they punish them for it.

Whereas many neo-institutional accounts of autocracy suggest regimes should publicize fraud in order to convey strength, our argument helps explain why autocrats in fact go to such lengths to conceal their use of it. Indeed, contemporary electoral autocracies such as Russia often commit significant resources to improve public perceptions of electoral integrity. More generally, our findings suggest that autocratic regimes maintain a façade of electoral democracy because many voters believe in that façade and express support for free elections. The neo-institutional literature on autocracy has also usefully pointed out that elections can provide dictators with important instrumental benefits, such as information and cooptation. But our findings suggest that scholars of autocracy should not overlook the more prosaic reasons that they retain (or introduce) elections. Elections are held because voters value them and expect them to be free and fair.

Literature Review

Autocrats turn to electoral manipulation for a number of reasons. Most obviously, such tactics can help the regime "win" elections. Ballot-box fraud adds votes in a straightforward manner and some studies show that vote-buying can be effective (Cantú and García-Ponce, 2015; Vicente, 2014). And while there is less research on intimidation, at least one recent study has found that threatening voters can be effective at turning out the vote (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi, 2018). Fraud may have other benefits as well, such as allowing the regime to manufacture large vote margins that convey an image of strength (Simpser, 2013). Fraud can signal to potential challengers that resistance is futile. To regime insiders, it demonstrates that defection will not be rewarded with success. Finally, some argue that fraud can make opposition voters believe their vote is useless and, thereby, reduce turnout among these voters (McCann and Domınguez, 1998; Simpser, 2012).

But fraud is not an electoral panacea for autocrats. One of the main contributions of the new literature on electoral authoritarianism is to point out that these regimes actually use electoral manipulation sparingly. Simply faking the election is rare (Magaloni, 2006; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Instead, these regimes invest considerable effort securing electoral victories that reflect the revealed preferences of voters. Genuine victories are preferable to manufactured ones because electoral manipulation is costly. Administrative costs are one factor—it is expensive to coordinate and implement nationwide fraud—but most accounts imply that the more important downside of fraud is that the masses react negatively to it. Indeed, the fact that autocrats usually try to hide fraud indicates that they believe they would suffer some consequence for committing fraud openly.

Electoral fraud, it has been argued, can undermine the legitimacy of an autocrat's electoral victory (Cornelius, 1975; Norris, 2014; Birch, 2011), and may be preferable because it conveys a more convincing image of invincibility (Magaloni, 2006). More worryingly for autocrats, a number of models link electoral fraud to the eruption of mass protest (Tucker, 2007; Fearon, 2011). These models assume that the opposition detests electoral manipulation and is able to capitalize on that anger to solve collective action problems, mobilize their supporters, and overthrow incumbents deemed responsible.

But fraud has another potential cost. It may reduce levels of political support for the regime, even among those that back it. In almost all countries, electoral manipulation is illegal: those who commit fraud are breaking the law. Moreover, individual acts of electoral manipulation have moral valence. Voter intimidation involves coercion, which in most cultures is viewed as immoral. To the extent that voters prefer virtuous candidates, they should punish those who use coercion to win votes. Moral evaluations of vote buying are more complicated, but available evidence indicates that most voters view it as inappropriate (Gonzalez Ocantos, Jonge, and Nickerson, 2014).Finally, while the moral calculus of ballot-box fraud has not been explored in the literature, it is conceivable that voters find ballot box fraud inappropriate if they view it as a form of stealing or cheating.

Thus, there are good reasons to think that incumbents may lose votes if voters were to discover that they manipulated elections. However, there are few studies that examine this empirically. On one hand, work by Kramon (2016) suggests that vote-buying helps candidates demonstrate competence, trustworthiness, and electoral viability to potential voters in places where patronage is pervasive. In contrast, Weitz-Shapiro (2014) uses a survey experiment in Argentina to show that middle-class voters withdrew their support from candidates who engaged in vote buying. Using vignette experiments, Gutierrez-Romero and LeBas (2015) show that voters in Kenya are less likely to express support for candidates who are rumored to have engaged in pre-election violence.

These studies are relevant for our research, but it is hard to directly compare our findings with theirs. Acts of physical violence—Gutierrez-Romero and LeBas (2015) reference murder in their experiment—hold much greater moral valence than the types of electoral manipulation that we study here. **?** conduct a survey experiment in which they examine how rumors of vote buying and intimidation affect support for hypothetical candidates in rural Bulgaria. Their research is the closest to ours, but as we discuss below, their main focus is on how socio-demographic factors affect evaluations of manipulation. We also use an expanded definition of electoral manipulation that includes intimidation, vote-buying, and ballot-box fraud.

Consequences of Electoral Manipulation: A Survey Experiment in Russia

Our main goal in this paper is to examine which voters autocratic regimes risk losing when they commit fraud. But before turning to that question, we first seek to determine whether electoral manipulation affects mass support for the authorities at all. We begin addressing this question by examining how Russians view the moral appropriateness of different types of electoral manipulation. The 2016 Russian Election Study (RES), our main data source for this study, included a battery of questions that tapped respondents' views on the acceptability of different types of electoral subversion.[1] The question wordings and distribution of responses are given in Table 1.

These specific acts were chosen because they are common in Russian elections. The first row is presented as a baseline. While attending ribbon-cutting ceremonies may be perceived by some as an abuse of state resources, it is unlikely to elicit a strong negative response from most voters. And indeed, as Table 1 shows, 55% of voters think that this is mostly acceptable. The next two rows assess the acceptability of two common forms of systemic manipulation: restrictions on opposition access to the ballot and the media. Voters strongly disapprove of both practices.

The last four rows show how Russians view different forms of election-day manipulation. Unsurprisingly, most disapprove of vote buying. But, interestingly, they evaluate various types of positive inducements differently. Thirty-seven percent of voters approve of distributing food packets to pensioners, but only 14% approve of handing out food or alcoholic drinks at rallies.

Unsurprisingly, row six shows that most voters (82%) strongly disapprove of electoral intimidation. Finally, the question in row seven taps voters assessments' of *karusels*, a type of ballot-box fraud.[2] Voters are slightly less disapproving of *karusels*, but still the vast majority (88%) dis-

[1]The 2016 RES was a nationally representative survey of 2,010 respondents from 48 regions, carried out between November 8 and December 4, 2016, just after the State Duma elections held that year. The survey was conducted by Levada Center and interviews conducted face-to-face.

[2]In Russia, the term *karusel* may refer to two slightly different electoral practices. It may refer

approve to some degree. On the whole, voters find all types of electoral subversion—with the possible exception of some types of vote buying—to be unacceptable.

TABLE 1: ACCEPTABILITY OF ELECTORAL MANIPULATIONS

Parties and politicians use many strategies to attract votes. In your opinion, how acceptable are the following actions?	Not Acceptable 1	2	3	Completely Acceptable 4
1. Attend opening ceremonies for cultural or sporting events during the month before elections	27%	17%	34%	22%
2. Limit opposition candidates from appearing on television	75%	17%	6%	2%
3. Create obstacles for opposition candidates to register	77%	17%	5%	1%
4. Hand out food packets to pensioners	37%	23%	24%	16%
5. Recruit people to attend political rallies with liquor or food	67%	20%	10%	4%
6. Tell workers of a local firm that they will lose their jobs if they don't vote correctly	82%	13%	4%	2%
7. Organize 'carousels' by which buses shuttle people to vote at multiple polling stations	75%	13%	8%	4%

These descriptive statistics are informative. Nondemocratic practices do not enjoy popular support among the vast majority of the population. However, our primary goal is to determine how awareness of electoral manipulation affects regime support. These questions do not tell us whether voters punish the authorities at the ballot box for manipulating elections. Voters may view manipulation as unacceptable, but such considerations may not enter into their voting calculus or they may be crowded out by other concerns.

One way to approach this question is to ask respondents about their assessments of electoral manipulation and correlate such attitudes with regime approval ratings. Such a correlation is

to simple multiple voting, in which groups of voters are transported from poll to poll in order to vote multiple times, usually using assumed names and/or absentee certificates. It may also refer to a monitoring scheme for facilitating ballot fraud.

informative–and we explore such analyses below–but it suffers from several limitations. For one, the direction of causality is unclear; perceptions of electoral integrity might increase support for the regime, or support for the regime may make it more likely that voters evaluate regime institutions (e.g. elections) in a positive light. There are other endogeneity concerns as well. It could be that perceptions of electoral integrity have no effect on regime support, but rather that both attitudes are codetermined by some other factor. Finally, the correlation does not tell us how the *revelation* of information about electoral manipulation might affect those who think elections are free and fair. Those who think that elections are honest may still turn against the regime if they were to discover that elections are manipulated.

To address such shortcomings, we analyze a survey experiment that we embedded on the 2016 RES survey. The experiment was designed to assess the likelihood that respondents would vote for a hypothetical candidate from the ruling party United Russia in the next State Duma election, conditional on 1) electoral manipulation by that candidate and 2) his professional background. The experiment had a 3X4 factorial design and each respondent was asked the following question:

> Imagine that during the next State Duma elections, a **[professional background treatment here]** is nominated by United Russia in your voting district. He is 50 years old and his program focuses on increased support for local schools and building new roads in the district. During the campaign, there emerges some interesting information about the candidate. On the one hand, it becomes known that he adopted two disabled children from a local orphanage. On the other hand, he **[electoral manipulation treatment here].** How likely is it that you would vote for this candidate?

Respondents were asked to rate their likelihood of voting for this candidate on a five point scale ranging from 'definitely will not vote' to 'definitely will vote.' Respondents were randomly assigned to one of 12 combinations of candidate professional background and electoral manipulation as depicted in Table 2. Covariate balance checks presented in Appendix Section A indicate that randomization was successful.[3] This type of candidate vignette is broadly similar to that used

[3]All respondents received one of the three professional background treatments. One quarter of respondents did not receive an electoral manipulation treatment, and constitute the control group.

in a number of recent experimental studies that vary attributes such as gender and policy positions (Schwarz, Hunt, and Coppock, 2018; Doherty, Dowling, and Miller, 2016).

TABLE 2: COVERAGE TABLE

	Entrepreneur	Head Doctor	Factory Worker
No Electoral Manipulation	162	167	153
Gave Out Presents to Voters Before the Elections	124	136	142
Organized Karusels to Take Voters to Polls	142	133	153
Threatened Several Colleagues so They Voted	153	145	160

Total number of respondents who received "No Electoral Manipulation" (control): 535
Total number of respondents who received "Any Fraud Treatment" (three treatments): 1475

We invoke three professional backgrounds in the first experimental arm: an entrepreneur, a doctor, and a worker (rabochii). Our experiment was designed with two purposes in mind: 1) to examine voter assessments of workplace mobilization and 2) to examine how electoral manipulation affects regime support. We are interested in the second question here and focus on those parts of the experiment that are relevant to this question. We collapse the professional background treatments in the subsequent analyses.

Three types of electoral manipulation were included as treatments. The first referred to vote buying. Although middle-income countries such as Russia typically see less vote-buying, the practice became well-known during the 1990s and poorer segments of the population still report being offered cash or gifts in exchange for their votes. Second, we included a treatment that references workplace threats against employees. This is by far the most common type of electoral intimidation in Russia (Frye, Reuter, and Szakonyi, 2018) and is likely familiar to respondents. Finally, we included a treatment that refers to ballot-box fraud. Specifically, we refer to a candidate that organized a multiple-voting scheme using buses to ferry voters to precincts. This type of ballot-box fraud is common in Russia and it is a type of fraud that respondents could envision candidates organizing. As Table 1 showed, respondents easily interpreted and evaluated all three treatments in terms of their acceptability during elections, with the latter two getting especially low marks.[4]

[4]Importantly, the response rate for these questions was very high. The vast majority of respondents recognized each practice and felt comfortable passing judgment.

Several features of the experiment are worth noting. First, we take care to choose wording that maximizes and equalizes the credibility of the fraud information for all respondents. In the real world, information about fraud–whether from mass media, the internet, or via rumor—is often discounted. The extent of this discounting can depend on the disposition or education of the respondent and credibility of the source. For this reason, it would be ill-advised to design an experiment that prompts respondents with a specific news story detailing a specific instance of fraud.

Our experiment is designed to hold constant the credibility of the source by prompting respondents to consider a situation in which information on electoral manipulation is internalized with some degree of certainty. We do this through the formulation "it becomes known." Respondents are prompted to think that the information about the candidate committing fraud is already accepted public knowledge, rather than being cued to think about whether the information is accurate or who might be disseminating it.[5] In other words, we invite respondents to consider how they would react in this hypothetical scenario if they *knew* that the fraud had occurred.[6] In the conclusion, we return to consider how respondents might accept information about fraud in the real world.

In order to make the vignette more realistic we focused on a specific candidate and hold constant their partisan affiliation (United Russia) and, as such, pro-regime status. Fraud by UR candidates reflects poorly on the party and President Putin, who is closely associated with the party.[7] One reason we focus on pro-regime candidates is because, as we discuss below, we are particularly interested in how pro-regime voters react to the revelation of electoral fraud.[8] The inclusion of a

[5]This approach mirrors other work that uses multiple candidate vignettes (Carey et al., 2020)

[6]The Russian language formulation is "stanovitsiya izvestno, chto." See the Appendix for the exact wording of the question in Russian.

[7]Support for United Russia and support for Putin do not overlap fully, but are very highly correlated (r=0.54). Our data indicate that support for United Russia is a sufficient but not necessary condition for supporting Putin. Only 1.5% of strong UR supporters (UR Support>7) said they did not support Putin, but 20% of UR opponents (UR Support<3) said they supported Putin.

[8]It is true that we cannot extrapolate these results directly to support for Putin. But we feel

partisan affiliation also reduces the need for speculation by the respondent. One common problem with hypothetical survey prompts is that a large proportion of respondents are unable to speculate about their behavior in an imagined situation. Cueing partisanship along with the adoption trait makes it more likely that a large share of respondents can form an opinion about this baseline candidate.

The full results of the experiment are presented in Figure 1.[9] The Y-axis shows the mean response on the vote propensity scale. Differences between professional backgrounds are slight and not the focus of this paper. The most important result is the difference in mean vote propensity between the three electoral manipulation treatment groups and the control group. As the figure shows, respondents who were told that the hypothetical candidate engaged in some form of electoral manipulation were significantly less likely to express support for the candidate. This effect holds for all types of electoral manipulation, but there are interesting differences across types. Voters are more turned off by ballot-box fraud than by vote-buying and threats.[10] It is perhaps not surprising that vote-buying is less offensive, and we explore this finding as well as variation between the treatment arms in Appendix Section C4.[11]

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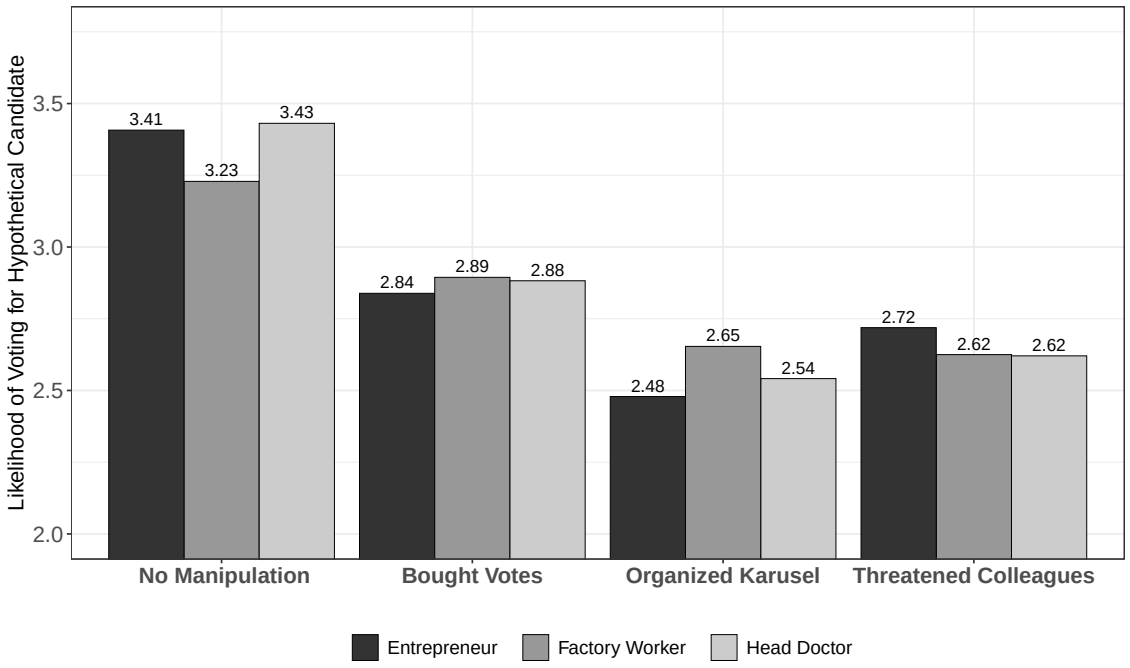
confident in asserting that a decline in support for UR and its candidates would be politically problematic and dangerous for the regime. If many voters were to abandon UR in a given election, this would fundamentally undermine the regime.

[9]Respondents answered this experiment after evaluating acceptability in Table 1. Though it is possible this affected their responses, we note that over 70 questions were asked in between. The results were replicated on a later survey which did not include any question about acceptability.

[10]The difference between the carousel treatment group and across the vote-buying and threat treatment groups is 0.21 and statistically significant.

[11]Surprisingly we do not find that several expected demographic characteristics (age, education, employment status, etc.) are correlated with positive views of the electoral manipulations listed in Table 1. In addition, these traits do not appear to mediate the treatment effect nor help explain why the Bought Votes treatment leads to a less negative response. In Appendix Section C4, we discuss

FIGURE 1: SUPPORT FOR HYPOTHETICAL CANDIDATE BY TREATMENT STATUS



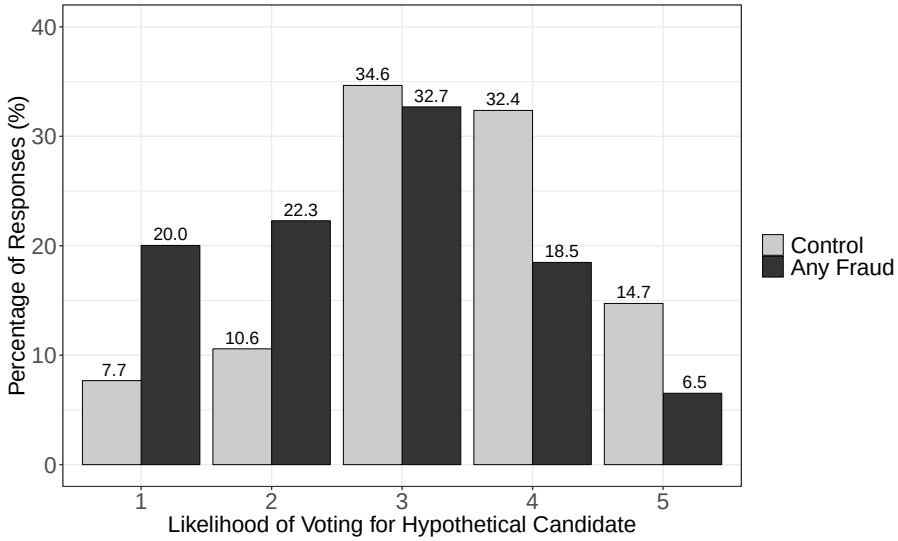
Our main interest, however, is the total effect of electoral manipulation on regime support. Therefore, for all subsequent analyses we collapse the manipulation treatment groups. The difference in means between the control group (the leftmost set of bars in Figure 1) and the remaining treatment groups (all other bars in Figure 1) is 0.67 (p=.000), which translates into a 13.4% decrease in vote propensity.[12] This is a substantively large effect. Since the vote propensity variable is an ordinal scale, this quantity cannot be directly interpreted as a 13% decrease in the probability of voting for the candidate. Rather it makes more sense to evaluate effect sizes across the range of the vote propensity variable. Figure 2 compares the distribution of responses on the 5-point vote propensity scale for the two groups. We see a sharp increase in the number of respondents, indicating a very low likelihood of voting for the UR candidate (the values of 1 and 2 on the Y-axis)

possible explanations for these null findings and reiterate the call for more research on why some individuals approve or disprove of certain electoral manipulations.

[12]The mean response for the control group is 3.35. Across the three manipulation treatment groups, the mean is 2.69.

upon receiving any of the manipulation treatments.

FIGURE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF EXPERIMENTAL OUTCOMES BY TREATMENT STATUS



Main Argument: Electoral Manipulation and Core Supporters

The results in the previous section indicate that information about electoral manipulation committed by pro-regime candidates reduces support for such candidates. But what type of voters are turned off by electoral manipulation? One conditioning factor that has received little attention is regime affinity. Do so-called 'swing voters' recoil more upon learning about electoral fraud, or might strongly-aligned regime supporters be more likely to withdraw their support? If it is only swing voters, then electoral manipulation may not be so costly for the regime, since many of these voters would not in the end vote for the regime any way. If electoral fraud, however, leads to the loss of core supporters, then it could have important consequences for regime stability.

In this section, we argue that strong regime supporters will be just as likely, if not more so, to punish UR candidates when they learn about electoral manipulation. This will happen if pre-existing awareness of fraud varies with regime affinity. If regime partisans have stronger pre-existing beliefs that elections are free and fair, they will be more likely to punish incumbents

when information about manipulation is revealed. By contrast, if swing or weakly aligned voters are already skeptical about electoral integrity, then the revelation of new information about fraud will do less to affect their vote choice. These voters have already incorporated expectations of significant electoral fraud into their political beliefs and therefore do not update.

There are a number of reasons to think that, on average, strong regime supporters will be less aware of electoral fraud. To the extent that voters disdain electoral fraud—indeed the previous section demonstrates that most do—strong regime supporters may only continue to support the regime because they have not been exposed to information about electoral manipulation. Fraud is not easy to perceive. It is an illicit activity, and regime officials go to great lengths to cover it up. Regime supporters might be even less attuned to it because they are apolitical or because they are more exposed to pro-regime media outlets and, therefore, regime propaganda.[13] Alternatively (or additionally), strong regime partisans may be oblivious to fraud for some of the reasons sketched above: they have been exposed to rumors in the past, but discounted them because they conflicted with prior notions of the regime's propriety.[14] Indeed, a recent study in Mexico finds evidence of just this phenomenon (Cantú and García-Ponce, 2015).

The tendencies sketched above will necessarily be strengthened if propriety is a trait that regime voters value highly. To the extent that regime supporters—or some subset of them—support the ruling party precisely *because* they perceive it to be more trustworthy or honorable than the opposition, they will be more likely to withdraw support when information of malfeasance is revealed. In other words, if new information about fraud erodes a core assumption that they hold about the regime, regime supporters may punish it at the polls.

Two possible hypotheses can be derived from these observations. The *weak* version of the argument suggests that *both* strongly-aligned and weakly-aligned regime supporters will withdraw

[13]They may self-select pro-regime media outlets or their exposure to such outlets may be what leads them to be regime supporters, or both.

[14]The treatment in our experiments propose that information on electoral manipulation by the candidate has become widely accepted.

their support from UR candidates when information about electoral manipulation is revealed. The *strong* version of the argument suggests that strongly-aligned regime supporters will be *more* likely to withdraw their support than weakly-aligned voters. Both of these arguments contrast with the expectations derived from arguments based on motivated reasoning, discussed below.

There are few existing studies of our research question. But a review of studies in adjacent literatures suggests that a strong case could be made that electoral manipulation will only affect vote choice among swing or weakly-aligned voters. Strongly-aligned voters could be practicing motivated reasoning, and therefore be more accepting of negative information about United Russia.

Motivated reasoning is a well-established phenomenon in political behavior (Kunda, 1990; Taber and Lodge, 2006). One particularly important contributor is partisanship. In many political settings, partisanship is as much a determinant of one's worldview as it is a consequence (Campbell et al., 1966; Bartels, 2002). Partisan biases affect public opinion on a huge number of issues, from evaluations of the economy to foreign and public policy (Duch, Palmer, and Anderson, 2000; Jerit and Barabas, 2012) and can operate via several possible mechanisms.

One is selective exposure to information. Partisans may only seek out information that supports their existing views. This mechanism is not relevant for the present study since our experimental manipulation provides subjects with information about fraud. A second possible mechanism is motivated skepticism. Here individuals use their reasoning powers to downplay or denigrate information that runs counter to their existing beliefs (Taber and Lodge, 2006; Lebo and Cassino, 2007). In our case, motivated skepticism could lead strong UR partisans to discount information about electoral manipulation. They may reason that the use of fraud was somehow justified or that it serves a higher purpose.

There is little scholarship on how partisanship affects assessments of electoral manipulation, but related studies suggest that we could expect motivated reasoning to play a role. Several scholars show that voters downplay scandals that afflict leaders of their own party (Bhatti, Hansen, and Olsen, 2013; Wagner, Tarlov, and Vivyan, 2014). One recent study from Spain found that voters are more likely to tolerate corruption if the offending politician is from their own party (Anduiza, Gal-

lego, and Muñoz, 2013). In Russia, Robertson (2017) finds that regime supporters are less likely to have knowledge of GOLOS, a vote monitoring organization sometimes viewed as oppositional, and less likely to express trust in vote monitoring organizations. Finally, Svolik (2020) provocatively argues that political polarization leads voters to tolerate undemocratic policies if it will help their preferred party defeat a detested opponent. In our empirical models below, we seek to adjudicate between this alternative hypothesis and our own. However, Carey et al. (2020) find that partisans in the United States are just as willing to punish co-partisans who support undemocratic positions as they are to punish opposition candidates.

Partisanship and Perceptions of Electoral Integrity

The previous section suggests that the costs of electoral manipulation depend on 1) whether fraud is already common knowledge and 2) who is aware of fraud. In this section, we investigate these questions. There are different views on the integrity of Russian elections. On one hand, election observer reports paint an altogether grim picture of opposition candidates being restricting from running, biased media coverage, intimidation, and fraud (ODIHR, 2003; GOLOS, 2012; Enikolopov et al., 2013).Statistical election forensics paint a similar picture, demonstrating that ballot box fraud has become commonplace (Myagkov, Ordeshook, and Shakin, 2009; Rundlett and Svolik, 2016). All of this accords with the Western scholarly consensus, which generally views Russia as an authoritarian regime.

However, substantial portions of the Russian electorate hold a much rosier view of how these same elections were held. Nationally representative polls find that although citizens detect weaknesses in the electoral process, their perceptions of electoral integrity are generally much more favorable than one might expect from reading election monitor reports. To demonstrate this, we draw on data from five Russian Election Surveys (RES) between 2000 and 2016. Each survey included the same set of questions asking respondents about their appraisal of elections in Russia. Respondents were asked whether they agreed with the following three statements: (1) elections in

Russia are conducted honestly (on a five-point scale, where 5 indicates that they were completely honest) and (2) voting makes a difference to what happens in the country (also on a five-point scale). Figure 3 plots the averages from respondents following five national elections.

We see that throughout the period, a large share of the electorate believes that elections are conducted honestly and to a slightly lesser degree, that electoral outcomes can affect their daily lives (Panels A and B).[15] Interestingly, opinions on these two issues do not shift markedly over time, even as steps were taken by the Russian government to consolidate media ownership in state hands and limit the ability of opposition parties to contest elections.

The results from the RES polls are by no means unique among work on Russia. Separate opinion polls have found that since 2000, a majority of Russian citizens believe votes are being counted honestly, media outlets are covering campaigns fairly, and real competition takes places between candidates (McAllister and White, 2011; Rose and Mishler, 2009). Less than 15% of respondents felt that electoral results in general could not be trusted.[16]

Nor are Russian respondents unique in viewing their elections as relatively clean, even while most outside observers think otherwise. Pietsch (2015) reports that most respondents in Southeast Asian electoral autocracies also think they are living in a democracy. Williamson (2020) finds that in most Arab and African autocracies a majority of respondents believe that elections are free and fair. Appendix Table F1 presents summary statistics from the latest wave of the World Values Survey (2010-2014) about how respondents living in electoral autocracies (the top panel) view the state of elections in their own countries. We see that even in regimes generally considered to be unfree, such as Jordan, Singapore, and Zimbabwe, substantial portions of the population believe that their elections are clean, often to the same degree as in more established democracies.

[15]In 2016, the distribution of responses was as follows: 25% responded 5 (honest); 22% said 4; 28% said 3; 14% said 2; and 12% said 1 (dishonest).

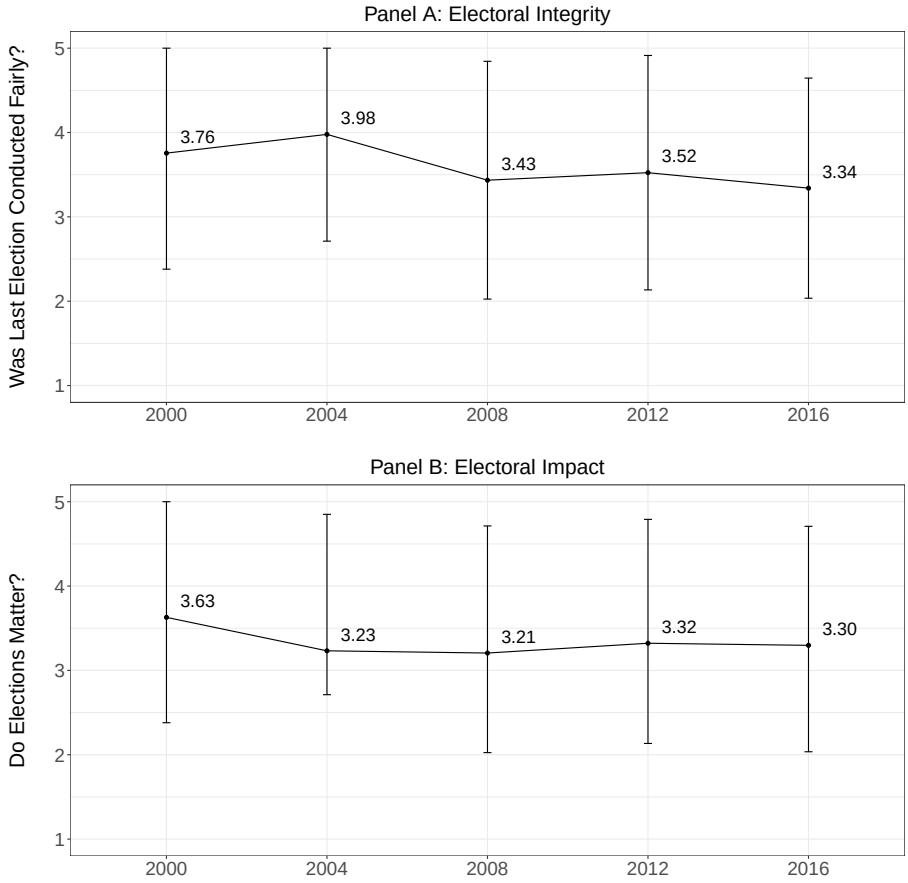
[16]For comparison roughly 70% of the U.S. electorate were very confident or somewhat confident that their votes were accurately cast and counted over 2004-2016. McCarthy, Justin and Jon Clifton. "Update: Americans' Confidence in Voting, Election". *Gallup*, November 1.

TABLE 3: REGIME SUPPORT AND VIEWS OF ELECTORAL INTEGRITY

	Perceptions of Electoral Integrity		Acceptability of Fraud		
	Electoral Integrity	Electoral Impact	Opp. Blocked	Karusel Voting	Media Restrictions
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Male	−0.072	−0.113	0.019	−0.022	0.014
	(0.068)	(0.070)	(0.029)	(0.039)	(0.032)
Age (log)	−0.112	−0.125	0.016	−0.097	−0.025
	(0.098)	(0.085)	(0.037)	(0.067)	(0.050)
Education	−0.040	−0.047	−0.015	0.0004	−0.027*
	(0.027)	(0.031)	(0.012)	(0.015)	(0.015)
Town Size	−0.049	0.046	−0.002	0.007	0.011
	(0.044)	(0.043)	(0.018)	(0.030)	(0.022)
Economic Situation	0.014	0.102***	0.002	−0.017	0.010
	(0.037)	(0.033)	(0.012)	(0.019)	(0.017)
Employed	−0.027	−0.207***	−0.004	0.0005	0.031
	(0.063)	(0.070)	(0.028)	(0.034)	(0.033)
CPSU Member	0.063	−0.007	−0.027	−0.038	0.025
	(0.117)	(0.091)	(0.054)	(0.073)	(0.050)
Voted	0.116*	0.440***	0.023	0.062*	0.036
	(0.058)	(0.073)	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.034)
No. Civil Society Orgs	−0.002	0.003	0.009	0.042*	0.032
	(0.034)	(0.059)	(0.019)	(0.023)	(0.021)
Interest in Politics	0.029	0.120***	−0.002	−0.016	−0.012
	(0.049)	(0.041)	(0.019)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Putin Support	0.346***	0.338***	−0.029	−0.003	−0.043**
	(0.041)	(0.042)	(0.020)	(0.027)	(0.019)
United Russia Support	0.113***	0.114***	0.013*	0.003	0.012
	(0.019)	(0.015)	(0.007)	(0.011)	(0.010)
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,589	1,725	1,641	1,704	1,647
R^2	0.292	0.304	0.122	0.159	0.105

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 This table examines the correlates of perceptions of electoral integrity and the acceptability of different types of electoral fraud using OLS models. The outcomes in the first two columns are measured on five-point scales (higher values indicate more positive perceptions). The outcomes in Columns 3-5 are all measured on four-point scales with higher values indicating greater acceptance of these activities. All models cluster standard errors at the region level.

FIGURE 3: BELIEFS ABOUT ELECTORAL INTEGRITY OVER TIME



The panels display the mean agreement among respondents across five RES surveys to the following statements: [Panel A] elections in Russia are conducted honestly (on a five-point scale, where 5 indicates that they were completely honest) and [Panel B] voting makes a difference to what happens in the country (also on a five-point scale). The error bars in the upper two panels show the distribution within one standard deviation above and below the mean.

Digging deeper into the 2016 RES survey results, we find that regime supporters are much more likely to have positive perceptions of electoral integrity. Table 3 (Columns 1-2) presents multivariate regressions where the outcome variables are the same measures of election integrity perceptions discussed above. Interestingly, basic demographics, such as gender, age, employment status, and economic situation, explain little of the variation in how people view the quality of elections.[17] What matters most are people's political leanings. Respondents who approve of President Putin's

[17]For the exact question wordings, please refer to the Appendix.

performance in office or support the ruling party United Russia are significantly more likely to believe that elections were held fairly (Column 1), voting in elections can influence political events in the country (Column 2).[18]

These patterns are not specific to the 2016 Duma elections. In Appendix Table B5, we see that even during the 2011-2012 electoral cycle when information about electoral fraud was more widespread across Russian media, regime supporters still held substantially more positive views of electoral integrity than those who did not support the regime. In fact, partisanship is the largest predictor of whether respondents viewed the elections as free and fair.

Moreover, as Appendix Tables B2 and B3 show regime supporters are not only more likely to believe that elections are free and fair, but they are also less likely to think that there were electoral violations during both the 2011 and 2016 parliamentary elections. Appendix Table B4 also shows that they were less likely to have heard of GOLOS, Russia's largest domestic vote monitoring NGO. Core UR supporters appear less aware of fraud, and may update more strongly when they find out that fraud has occurred.

However, regime supporters may also define electoral integrity differently, which could drive the correlation between partisanship and views of electoral integrity. By holding electoral processes to a lower standard, they may be more likely to believe that the government is adequately administering elections and that a more minimal definition of integrity is being met. We explore this possibility in Columns 4-6 of Table 3 which investigates whether respondents believe that common electoral violations are broadly acceptable (exact question wordings are shown in Table 1). We find no evidence that support for Putin and/or the ruling party United Russia is associated with holding a different definition of what electoral integrity actually means.[19] Moreover, there are

[18]These findings hold when either *United Russia Support* or *Putin Support* are entered into the regression individually. In the appendix, we also show similar results using an indicator for whether respondents believe that Russia is a democracy.

[19]In Appendix Tables B7 and B8, we also show that both regime supporters and opponents who think that violations took place were less likely to view elections as free and fair. We find no

few predictors consistently associated with an individual's approval of different electoral malpractices, which may be expected given the tight distribution around unacceptability shown in Table 1. Cross-national surveys suggest there is remarkable congruence worldwide, both among masses and elites, about the normative standards required to make an election free and fair (Norris, 2013).

Of course, these correlations do not allow us to identify the direction of causality. Respondents who view elections as free and fair may reward the regime for upholding democratic procedures. Or they may view elections as honest because they are under the influence of partisanship or propaganda. Either way, the important point for our study is that such a correlation exists. The next section explores some important implications of this finding.

Heterogenous Effects of Learning about Electoral Manipulation

Our main argument is that core regime supporters should be more sensitive to electoral fraud than are weakly aligned voters. We test this by examining the heterogeneous treatment effects from the framing experiment outlined above. We hypothesize that support for a regime-affiliated candidate will fall more among individuals with stronger pre-existing affinity towards United Russia (and President Putin) than among those with weaker commitments to the regime. We use several measures of regime support for these purposes: a 5-item scale measuring personal approval of President Putin's time in office, a 10-item scale measuring support for United Russia, and a binary indicator for whether or not a respondent voted for United Russia in the 2016 parliamentary elections. The first two indicators capture respondents' self-reported support for the regime, while the third question measures actual behavior taken in support of United Russia. For our main analyses, we collapse the three types of electoral manipulations employed in the framing experiment into a binary treatment indicator ('any fraud') for whether or not a respondent received any information about a candidate engaging in this type of behavior.

First, in Table 4, we show differences in means across both the different treatment conditions

difference between regime and opposition supporters in this regard.

and levels of regime support. In each panel, the three columns divide the sample into Strong UR Supporters (values 9-10), Weak UR Supporters (values 4-8), and Opposition Supporters (values 1-3). We then transform the 5-point vote-intention scale into binary indicators that are easier to interpret as reflecting likelihood to vote (or not vote) for the hypothetical UR candidate. First, in Panel A, we use a binary indicator coding equal to one if a respondent answered 4 or 5 on the turnout scale, indicating they were likely or definitely likely to vote for the candidate. Responses of 3 (50/50), 2 (unlikely), and 1 (definitely unlikely) were all coded as 0. The panel then shows the raw percentages for this variable based on treatment conditions (the rows). The Control group did not receive any of the three treatments indicating the candidate committed fraud, while the Treatment group collapses all respondents assigned to any of the three.

The results show that Strong UR Supporters in the Control Group have a 62.8% chance of voting for the hypothetical candidate, which makes sense given their partisanship. But when they are assigned any of the three fraud treatments, their average likelihood of voting for that candidate falls to 29.5%, a drop of 33.3 percentage points (or 53% in percent terms: 33.3/62.8). Weak UR Supporters do not react as strongly, with only a 20.4 percentage point drop (or 43% in percent terms). The treatment effect for Opposition supporters is roughly the same.

In Panel B of Table 4, we code respondents who answered 1 (definitely unlikely) or 2 (unlikely) on the five point scale as 1, and 0 otherwise. This measure gives the probability of the respondent voting 'against' the UR candidate. Here again we see larger treatment effects for strong UR supporters, whose propensity to vote against the candidate increases by roughly four times (43.2 vs 10.5). It is noteworthy that 43% of strong UR supporters affirmed that they would not vote for the UR candidate if s/he committed fraud. The treatment effects for the other two groups are sizable but not nearly as large: weak UR supporters are a little more than twice as likely to oppose the UR candidates, while opposition supporters oppose a little less than twice as often.

In Panel C, we perform the same exercise but with a binary indicator if the respondents answered that they might vote for the UR candidate, but they might not (i.e. 1 if they responded 3 on the scale, and 0 otherwise). We do not see any significant differences differences between treat-

TABLE 4: TREATMENT EFFECTS BROKEN DOWN BY REGIME SUPPORT

Panel A: Propensity to Vote For UR Candidates (Choices 4-5)

	Strong UR Supporters	Weak UR Supporters	Opposition
Control	62.8	46.9	29.2
Treatment (Any Fraud)	29.5	26.5	15.7

Panel B: Propensity to Vote Against UR Candidates (Choices 1-2)

	Strong UR Supporters	Weak UR Supporters	Opposition
Control	10.5	16.7	34.7
Treatment (Any Fraud)	43.2	39.3	54.6

Panel C: Propensity to Answer 'Maybe Would, Maybe Wouldn't' (Choice 3)

	Strong UR Supporters	Weak UR Supporters	Opposition
Control	26.7	36.5	36.1
Treatment (Any Fraud)	27.3	34.2	29.6

Panel D: Propensity to Answer 'Don't Know' (Choice 7)

	Strong UR Supporters	Weak UR Supporters	Opposition
Control	4.4	9.4	8.9
Treatment (Any Fraud)	9.4	11.6	9.2

All figures are percentages. The outcome in Panel A is a binary indicator if a respondent answered 4 or 5 on the five point scale about whether they would vote for the hypothetical UR candidate (i.e. likely voters). The outcome in Panel B is a binary indicator if a respondent answered 1 or 2 on the five point scale about whether they would vote for the hypothetical UR candidate (i.e. unlikely voters). The outcome in Panel C is a binary indicator if a respondent answered 'Maybe I would vote for him, maybe not' (response 3) to the question, and 0 otherwise. The outcome in Panel D is a binary indicator if a respondent answered 'Don't Know / Hard to Answer' (response 7) to the question, and 0 otherwise.

ment and control across the three groups. Finally, respondents in the experiment were allowed to answer 'Difficult to Respond', instead of picking a value on the five-point scale of support for the UR candidate. Since approximately 11% of respondents struggled to answer in this way, we might expect that difficulty to reflect differences in the way partisans handle information that conflicts with their priors about their preferred candidates. To explore this we code a binary indicator in Panel D for whether a respondent answered 'Don't Know' (response 7), and 0 otherwise. There is a treatment effect among strong UR supporters, though part of that may be because Strong UR

Supporters in the Control Group were especially likely to have a concrete opinion about the UR candidate (only 4.4% answered DK). Alternativey, these supporters could simply now be unsure about whether they would vote for their co-partisan. [20]

Taken together, we see that learning about fraud produces the largest effect on Strong UR Supporters; they become less likely to vote for UR candidates and more likely to affirm that they will not vote for them. We next show a series of OLS models in Table 5 where we regress the likelihood of a respondent voting for the candidate described in the experimental vignette on the 'any fraud' treatment indicator and a range of covariates. In Column 1, we exclude the treatment group from the model to examine the benchmark case (the control group). Intuitively, we find that individuals with a stronger affinity for the party are more likely to support its candidates, but no other demographic characteristics predict support.[21] Adding the 'any fraud' treatment in Column 2 confirms the results presented above in Figure 1: overall support for UR candidates drops when respondents learn about electoral manipulations being committed.

Columns 3-8 then present heterogeneous treatment effects along three measures of support for the regime. We find consistent evidence in favor of our main hypothesis: United Russia candidates who engage in fraud see their electoral support drop more among core supporters than among weakly aligned voters. It makes little difference how the survey population is subset, whether by high versus low approval ratings of Putin in office (Columns 3-4), high or low levels of support United Russia more broadly (Columns 5-6), or having voted for United Russia (Columns 7-8).[22]

[20] In Appendix Section C4, we show robustness checks, which indicate that most of the "Hard to Answer" treatment effects come from the 'Bought Votes' Treatment. Respondents seem to want more information about this specific practice before making up their minds about the candidate involved, When all the treatment arms are collapsed, however, we do not observe that the collapsed 'Any Fraud' treatment leads to more 'Don't Knows.'

[21] This set of null findings is not particularly meaningful, given the inclusion of the *United Russia Support* variable. The results are robust to including or excluding the covariate controls.

[22] All results remain statistically and substantively unchanged when we remove the controls for

TABLE 5: HETEROGENEOUS EFFECTS OF LEARNING ABOUT ELECTORAL FRAUD

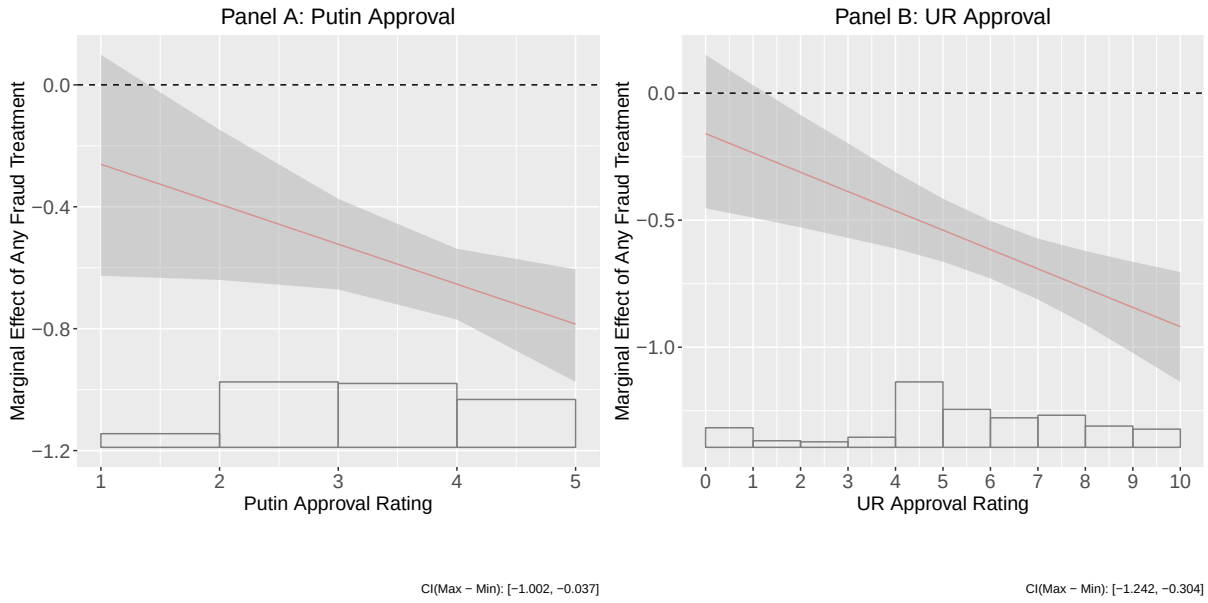
			Putin Approval		UR Approval		Voted for UR	
	Control	Full Sample	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Any Fraud Treatment		-0.642^{***}	-0.974^{***}	-0.589^{***}	-0.997^{***}	-0.621^{***}	-0.896^{***}	-0.444^{***}
		(0.060)	(0.124)	(0.072)	(0.173)	(0.073)	(0.109)	(0.140)
Male	-0.204^{*}	-0.113^{*}	-0.161	-0.121^{*}	-0.201	-0.151^{**}	-0.108	-0.051
	(0.116)	(0.059)	(0.132)	(0.070)	(0.190)	(0.069)	(0.111)	(0.132)
Age (log)	0.073	0.019	0.139	0.007	0.266	0.062	0.237	-0.117
	(0.168)	(0.079)	(0.185)	(0.092)	(0.246)	(0.092)	(0.156)	(0.227)
Education	-0.058	0.016	0.049	0.004	-0.022	0.034	0.038	0.046
	(0.048)	(0.023)	(0.045)	(0.029)	(0.066)	(0.028)	(0.040)	(0.053)
Town Size	-0.040	0.042^{*}	0.047	0.050^{*}	0.033	0.053^{*}	0.085^{*}	0.063
	(0.046)	(0.023)	(0.052)	(0.029)	(0.074)	(0.028)	(0.045)	(0.057)
Economic Situation	0.054	0.003	0.034	-0.019	0.135^{*}	-0.010	0.069	-0.118^{*}
	(0.056)	(0.028)	(0.057)	(0.034)	(0.079)	(0.033)	(0.053)	(0.065)
Employed	-0.034	-0.030	-0.037	-0.049	-0.218	-0.009	0.054	0.091
	(0.113)	(0.060)	(0.133)	(0.071)	(0.181)	(0.072)	(0.116)	(0.144)
CPSU Member	0.076	0.145	0.240	0.080	-0.167	0.237^{*}	0.112	0.034
	(0.181)	(0.096)	(0.183)	(0.119)	(0.252)	(0.122)	(0.164)	(0.174)
Voted	0.001	0.162^{***}	0.273^{**}	0.171^{**}	0.145	0.164^{**}		
	(0.116)	(0.061)	(0.135)	(0.072)	(0.192)	(0.073)		
No. Civil Society Orgs	-0.064	-0.018	-0.030	-0.029	0.080	-0.010	-0.071	-0.061
	(0.057)	(0.029)	(0.053)	(0.036)	(0.095)	(0.033)	(0.058)	(0.058)
Interest in Politics	0.017	0.026	-0.016	0.017	-0.068	0.038	-0.059	0.033
	(0.058)	(0.029)	(0.065)	(0.036)	(0.087)	(0.036)	(0.056)	(0.073)
Putin Support	0.100	0.064^{*}			-0.052	0.065	0.030	0.356^{***}
	(0.071)	(0.034)			(0.125)	(0.041)	(0.068)	(0.065)
United Russia Support	0.111^{***}	0.070^{***}	-0.024	0.084^{***}				
	(0.028)	(0.014)	(0.028)	(0.016)				
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	436	1,610	404	1,091	258	1,079	533	339
R^2	0.263	0.245	0.391	0.235	0.398	0.249	0.326	0.314

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 This table uses OLS models to examine the framing experiment. Column 1 restricts the analysis to only the 'control group' (which received no information about fraud). Column 2 estimates the same treatment effect graphically depicted in Figure 1, while including covariates. Columns 3 and 4 use a five-point scale to subset to respondents with high levels of approval of Putin's performance in office (a value of 5) and low levels (values of 3 and 4). Columns 5 and 6 use a ten-point scale to subset the sample to respondents with high levels of approval of United Russia (values higher than 7) and low levels (values between 4 and 7). Columns 7 and 8 subset the sample by whether the respondent voted for United Russia in the 2016 Duma Election.

For the variables measuring Putin and UR approval ratings, the sample is subset among those at

Putin Support and *UR support* in the respective models that examine the conditional effects of the other. These two variables are correlated at r=0.53.

FIGURE 4: MARGINAL EFFECTS



the very top of the scale (a rating of 5 out 5 for Putin, or a rating above 8 out of 10 for United Russia) and those in the middle (a rating of 3 or 4 out of 5 for Putin, or a rating between 4 and 8 for United Russia).[23] In each instance, the difference in coefficients on the treatment between regime and opposition supporters is large and statistically significant.

In Appendix Table C1, we show models including interactions between the treatment dummy and the three measures of regime support; the coefficients on the interaction terms are significant at the 95% level or above. Figure 4 is produced on the basis of Models 1 and 2 from that table, with the marginal effect of the 'any fraud' treatment shown on the y-axis across different values of Putin's approval rating (Panel A) and support for United Russia (Panel B); the distribution of responses are shown as inlaid histograms. There is a strong negative relationship between the degree of support for the regime and the effect of learning about electoral fraud committed by affiliated candidates.

One concern is that these large differences are driven by a mechanical feature of our measure-

[23]The results are robust to including the bottom part of the distribution for both variables (the opposition) in the 'low' category.

ment strategy. Since regime supporters are more likely to back the United Russia candidate ex ante (i.e. without any knowledge of their campaign activities), their pre-treatment level of candidate support will obviously be higher, and, therefore, these respondents have farther to fall down the five point scale. For example, consider the extreme scenario in which the effect of revealing fraud is to induce all respondents to report that they will "definitely not vote" for the candidate (this is equal to one, the lowest point on the scale). Swing voters, whose pre-treatment level of support is three, exhibit a treatment effect of two, while core supporters, whose pre-treatment level of support is five, will exhibit a treatment effect of four. This scenario is patently implausible, but it illustrates the mathematical problem.

However, our results are not driven by this floor effect. The *percentage* drop relative to the group is still higher among strongly aligned regime partisans than it is among the weakly aligned. For example, support for the United Russia candidate among strong Putin supporters (Column 3) falls by 24 percent (relative to their baseline level) when they are informed of electoral fraud; among swing voters support drops 18 percent relative to the baseline (Column 4). Differential effects are still present: regime supporters are more turned off by learning that United Russia candidates commit electoral violations.

Regime Perceptions, Information, and the Effect of Electoral Fraud

Why does evidence of electoral fraud more strongly affect core regime supporters? What are these voters learning that makes them withdraw their support? In Table 6, we explore several explanations. One possibility is that electoral fraud undermines the regime's reputation for propriety. Measuring a respondent's views on the honesty of the regime is difficult, especially since different respondents may conceive of the regime in different ways. In Russia, almost all regime supporters also support Putin and most associate United Russia closely with Putin. Thus, one adequate proxy could be respondent's view's of Putin's character.

Surveys find that Russians identify several positive traits in Putin. In our survey, seventy-one percent of respondents agreed with the statement that he was a "strong leader" (24% said

'mostly yes').[24] Another trait that voters associate with Putin is honesty. In the 2016, RES, 54% of respondents agreed that Putin is honest and deserving of trust (33% said 'mostly yes').

Learning about electoral fraud may undermine perceptions of Putin's virtues. Voters that receive objective information about their politicians being corrupt and dishonest are more likely to rescind their electoral support (Ferraz and Finan, 2008). Despite the appeal of lying to hide undesirable characteristics, honest candidates still enjoy electoral advantages since voters highly value trustworthy candidates, irrespective of their policy promises (Callander and Wilkie, 2007). Similarly, committing electoral fraud can signal weakness; autocrats must break the formal electoral rules in order to ward off challengers.

In Table 6, we construct model specifications that are similar to those above to examine heterogeneity in treatment effects based both on respondents views of Putin's character and their appraisal of elections in Russia. We find that those who believe that Putin is strong (Columns 1-2) and honest (Columns 3-4) are more likely to react negatively when they learn that a United Russia candidate has committed fraud.[25]

Another possibility is that the effect depends on pre-conceived notions of fraud. Those who already believe that elections are fraudulent should be less likely to update their views on UR candidates when they learn about fraud. Conversely, those who think elections are free and fair should be more likely to update their candidate preferences when they learn about fraud. Columns 5 and 6 examine whether the treatment effect varies according to whether respondents believe that Russian elections are free and fair. The results strongly suggest that they do. The effect of the

[24]The question asked respondents whether they agreed with certain evaluations of Putin's character, prompting them with a four-point scale with values of 'no', 'mostly no', 'mostly yes', and 'yes'. Voters also view Putin as being competent (77%). Interestingly, it is not simply the case that voters evaluate Putin highly on every dimension. Only forty-four percent thought that he "really thinks about the interests of people like me".

[25]We divide respondents into two groups: those who said 'yes' when asked to evaluate Putin on these dimensions and those who gave any other answer.

TABLE 6: HOW ELECTORAL FRAUD UNDERMINES PERCEPTIONS OF THE REGIME

	Putin is Strong		Putin is Honest		Electoral Integrity		2016 Political Internet	
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	Yes	No
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Any Fraud Treatment	−0.701***	−0.466***	−0.763***	−0.492***	−0.918***	−0.579***	−0.451***	−0.696***
	(0.072)	(0.115)	(0.087)	(0.096)	(0.139)	(0.073)	(0.147)	(0.067)
Male	−0.101	−0.066	−0.155*	−0.104	−0.046	−0.125*	−0.366***	−0.027
	(0.071)	(0.107)	(0.087)	(0.092)	(0.137)	(0.070)	(0.136)	(0.066)
Age (log)	0.070	−0.134	0.126	−0.128	0.147	−0.051	−0.124	−0.028
	(0.095)	(0.155)	(0.113)	(0.131)	(0.168)	(0.099)	(0.213)	(0.085)
Education	0.015	−0.007	0.034	0.005	0.047	0.008	0.021	0.017
	(0.028)	(0.044)	(0.034)	(0.037)	(0.051)	(0.028)	(0.060)	(0.026)
Town Size	0.064**	0.004	0.053	0.035	−0.009	0.055*	0.105*	0.013
	(0.028)	(0.049)	(0.033)	(0.039)	(0.066)	(0.028)	(0.060)	(0.026)
Economic Situation	−0.009	0.00004	0.007	−0.008	−0.037	0.017	−0.029	0.020
	(0.033)	(0.052)	(0.041)	(0.044)	(0.066)	(0.033)	(0.064)	(0.031)
Employed	−0.026	−0.098	0.023	−0.062	−0.157	−0.034	0.010	−0.044
	(0.073)	(0.110)	(0.090)	(0.093)	(0.147)	(0.070)	(0.147)	(0.067)
CPSU Member	0.119	0.156	0.180	0.164	0.099	0.153	0.191	0.168
	(0.116)	(0.184)	(0.136)	(0.153)	(0.198)	(0.117)	(0.283)	(0.103)
Voted	0.217***	0.168	0.306***	0.105	0.220	0.202***	0.186	0.217***
	(0.075)	(0.110)	(0.092)	(0.093)	(0.159)	(0.071)	(0.142)	(0.068)
No. Civil Society Orgs	−0.006	−0.127*	−0.010	−0.017	−0.043	−0.013	−0.020	−0.030
	(0.033)	(0.068)	(0.047)	(0.042)	(0.081)	(0.034)	(0.086)	(0.032)
Interest in Politics	0.012	0.058	−0.020	0.058	−0.030	0.016	0.024	0.043
	(0.036)	(0.056)	(0.043)	(0.047)	(0.074)	(0.036)	(0.085)	(0.032)
United Russia Support	0.062***	0.128***	0.026	0.107***	0.008	0.095***	0.050*	0.083***
	(0.015)	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.018)	(0.030)	(0.014)	(0.028)	(0.013)
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,157	436	794	661	366	1,077	335	1,269
R^2	0.228	0.399	0.239	0.305	0.367	0.243	0.314	0.272

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1 This table uses regression analysis to examine additional heterogeneous treatment effects.. Columns 1 and 2 use a four-point scale to subset the sample into respondents that rank Putin highly as a strong leader (top value of 4) and those that rank him lower (values less than 4). Columns 3 and 4 use a four-point scale to subset the sample into respondents that rank Putin highly as an honest person (top value of 4) and those that rank him lower (values less than 4). Columns 5 and 6 use a five-point scale about whether respondents believe elections are conducted honestly to subset the sample by those with positive views (top value of 5) and those with less positive (values less than 5). Columns 7 and 8 subset according a binary indicator for whether the respondent read internet news during the 2016 campaign. All models cluster standard errors at the individual level, on which the treatment was administered.

fraud treatment is much larger among respondents who think Russian elections are free and fair.

Columns 7 and 8 takes a different tack on this same question. Specifically, we examine whether respondents who are plausibly less exposed to information about fraud are more affected by the

fraud treatment in our experiment. In Russia, information on fraud is rarely encountered on television/radio or in (most) print media. The internet is practically the only media platform where Russians might learn about fraud. But not all Russians actively use the internet and most do not use it for reading political news. In Columns 7 and 8, we subset our models according to whether respondents reported that they used the internet for reading political news during the 2016 election campaign. We find that the treatment had smaller effects for those who reported that they read political news on the internet during the campaign. These individuals are more likely to be pre-exposed to information on fraud. The treatment effects were larger for those respondents who accessed internet political news.[26]

Replication and Extension

One shortcoming of our experiment is that it is not able to distinguish between two mechanisms that could be driving the observed drop in support among core regime supporters. Electoral fraud may be leading regime supporters to consider other candidates, or it could be leading them to consider abstention. Either way, the findings indicate that regime supporters are withdrawing their political support from regime candidates, but it is interesting to separate these potential mechanisms.

In particular, there is the possibility that fraud might drastically reduce turnout by the opposition, which would offset any decrease in support by regime supporters. Several studies find that fraud deters participation by the opposition (McCann and Domınguez, 1998; Simpser, 2012). Our findings would have less meaning if fraud produced a drop in regime support that was outweighed by a concomitant drop in opposition turnout. In other words, United Russia may not fear a slight deterioration of its core support if violations of electoral integrity also cause opposition supporters to disengage from politics and cease voting against the regime.

[26]Note that all models here control for regime support. In Appendix Section B3, we show these heterogenous treatment effects in just the regime support subset. Findings are similar. Appendix Table B9 also explore other measures of exposure to prior information about fraud.

To address this, we placed two additional survey experiments on a representative survey of 1600 Russian adults, conducted in May 2018, roughly 18 months after the our original survey. Both '2018 Experiments' had a near identical vignette to that used in September 2016: we give respondents information about a fictional 50-year old businessman from United Russia running for the State Duma during the next elections; this person had also adopted two children.[27] The experimental treatment gave half the sample additional information that this candidate had organized a multiple-voting scheme using buses to ferry voters to multiple precincts, using identical wording to the 'Organized Carousel' treatment used in the '2016 Experiment' and shown in Table 2. See Appendix Section E1 for the exact wordings.

The important difference in this second set of experiments in 2018 is the outcome variable. Our '2018 Turnout Experiment' asked respondents asked about their likelihood of turning out to vote on a 1-5 scale and was administered to half of the respondents. Our '2018 Vote Choice Experiment' was given to the other half of the respondents, who were asked about their likelihood of voting for this candidate on a 1-5 scale. Thus, the outcome in the '2018 Vote Choice Experiment' is identical to that asked in the '2016 experiment' analyzed above, while the '2018 Turnout Experiment' focuses only on whether respondents would vote at all. Table 7 presents the breakdown of respondents across the different treatment arms and outcome variables. Each respondent was assigned to receive either the Turnout or Vote Choice experiments, and within each one, each respondent had a 50% chance of receiving the treatment, i.e. learning that the UR candidate committed fraud.

TABLE 7: 2018 EXPERIMENTS COVERAGE TABLE

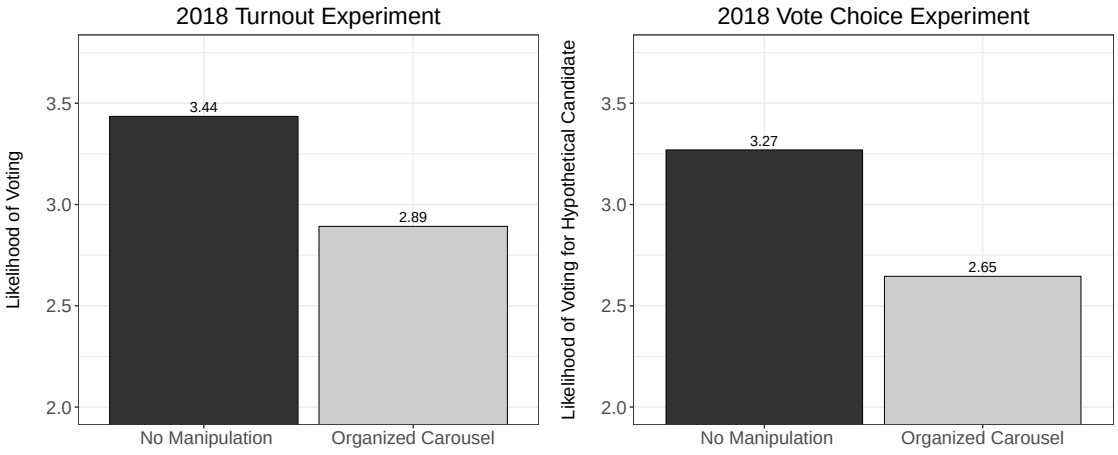
Experimental Outcome:	Turnout	Vote Choice
No Electoral Manipulation	363	371
Organized Carousels to Take Voters to Polls	362	350

Total respondents who received 'Turnout' outcome: 725
Total respondents who received 'Vote Choice' outcome: 721

These experiments accomplish several objectives. First, '2018 Vote Choice Experiment' is essentially a replication check of our initial results from the 2016 Experiment, albeit using a sim-

[27]Note that we use a single occupational background given constraints on sample size.

FIGURE 5: FRAUD, TURNOUT, AND VOTE CHOICE

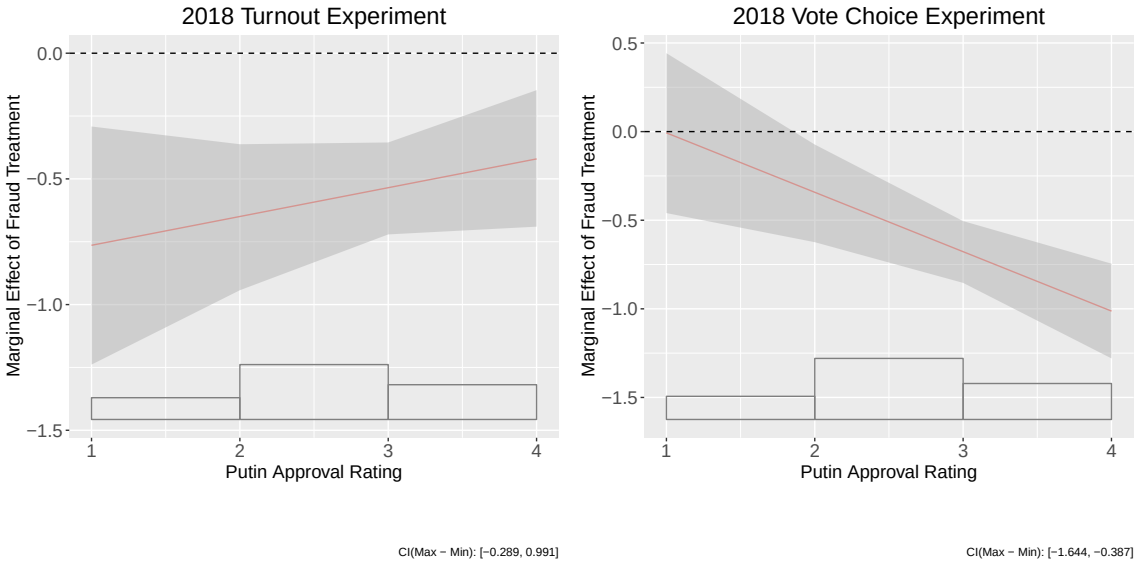


plified set of treatment conditions. This helps build confidence that the patterns identified in the previous section analyzing the 2016 Experiment are not specific to the Russian political climate that year. Second, the '2018 Turnout Experiment' allows us to investigate whether learning about fraud decreases turnout and/or support for the candidate responsible for it.

Figure 5 presents the results. In the left panel, we see that the treatment effect of fraud on turnout is negative. In the control group, the mean turnout propensity on a 5-point scale, with 3 indicating uncertainty, is 3.44. When respondents learn that the candidate has committed fraud, that number drops to 2.89, an effect of -0.55 that is statistically significant at the 99% level. Voters in general are less likely to vote when electoral integrity suffers. In the right panel, we see again that support for the candidate committing the fraud also drops. The treatment effect of -0.62 is roughly the same using a 5-point scale measuring candidate support.

Finally, in Figure 6, we explore heterogeneity across different levels of support for Putin, measured on a four-point scale. As before, we show the marginal effects of the fraud treatment for each outcome: turnout (left panel) and vote choice (right panel); the point estimates come from models that control for demographics such as age, income, and employment status. First, we see a slightly positive, but not statistically significant, interaction effect of fraud and Putin support on turnout. In other words, both regime and opposition supporters are less likely to turn out after they learn that a

FIGURE 6: HETEROGENOUS EFFECTS OF FRAUD ON TURNOUT, AND VOTE CHOICE



UR candidate committed fraud; the degree to which fraud dissuades them from voting is relatively small. Just as importantly, we replicate our findings from the 2016 Experiment in the right panel: regime supporters are significantly more turned off by new information on UR-sponsored fraud than are opposition supporters. The substantive effect sizes are roughly the same as they were two years prior. In the Appendix, we show that the effects are robust to interacting the treatment with a ten-point scale of support for United Russia.

There are several things to note about these results. First, contrary to some existing accounts, the findings demonstrate that fraud reduces turnout not only among the opposition, but also among regime supporters. Existing studies argue that fraud creates the perception that opposition votes will not count. But it stands to reason that fraud could produce a similar effect among regime supporters. If regime supporters realize that electoral outcomes are pre-determined, they should have less reason to think their vote will matter and less incentive to vote. Consistent with this, our experiment shows that fraud reduces turnout across the electorate. Indeed, observational evidence from the 2016 RES shows that perceptions of electoral manipulation reduced self-reported turnout among regime supporters just as much as it did among the opposition and swing voters.[28]

[28]Models in Appendix Table B2 show a positive and statistically significant relationship between

Note that this finding is not necessarily at odds with the theoretical arguments in previous work. Even if fraud reduces feelings of electoral efficacy among opposition supporters more than it does for regime supporters, it could still be the case that regime supporters would be more disillusioned by the revelation of fraud. In other words, the mechanism we propose in this paper could be operating alongside the differential electoral efficacy argument to produce the findings we see in the 2018 Turnout Experiment.

Taken together the results suggest that the heterogenous effects in our main 2016 Experiment are being driven by changes in vote choice, rather than turnout. Since fraud appears to reduce turnout equally among both regime supporters and the opposition, it stands to reason that the larger treatment effects for regime supporters in the 2016 experiment (and in 2018 Vote Choice Experiment) are being driven by decisions to withdraw support from regime candidates. Once inside the ballot box, core regime supporters appear to be abandoning ruling party candidates that commit fraud.

Finally, these findings reinforce our contention that fraud is electorally costly for the regime. If fraud reduced opposition turnout to such a degree that it offset any loss of support from regime supporters, then fraud would hurt the regime's chances of winning. Our findings suggest this is not the case. The 2018 Vote Choice Experiment shows that fraud reduces turnout for opposition and regime supporters to an equal degree. Moreover, fraud appears to be causing regime supporters to withdraw their support from fraudulent United Russia candidates.

Discussion and Implications

In sum, our findings suggest that voters in Russia punish regime candidates who engage in fraud. This effect is largest among those who are the strongest supporters of the regime. Polarization is not so strong in Russia that regime supporters excuse regime candidates for fraud (c.f. Svolik (2020)). Instead they punish them for it. Most regime supporters believe that elections are free and

perceptions of electoral integrity and turnout among both regime and opposition supporters.

fair and most believe that this is how it should be. Gaining awareness of electoral fraud dispels preconceived notions about the regime and its electoral propriety. When fraud is revealed, many pro-regime voters withdraw their support for the regime, which appears to be conditional on the government maintaining its commitment to clean elections.

These findings have important implications for both the comparative literature on autocracy and the study of contemporary Russian politics. For studies of comparative autocracy, our findings highlight an understudied consequence of electoral fraud. Much of the recent neo-institutional literature on electoral fraud has centered on how fraud sends a signal of strength to elites (Rozenas, 2016; Simpser, 2013; Gehlbach and Simpser, 2015). One puzzle that emerges from this literature is why autocrats try so hard to conceal fraud. If fraud deters all sorts of subversive and oppositional activity, then why do autocrats not publicize it? Scholars of contentious politics suggest that they do not publicize it because it may lead to opposition protest (Tucker, 2007; Bunce and Wolchik, 2011). This seems hard to deny, but we highlight another reason that autocrats disguise fraud: they do so because their core supporters will be turned off by fraud and will withdraw their support from the regime if they learn of it. The fact that polarization is relatively limited in Russia suggests that findings from this survey experiment reflect real-world behavior: strong partisan biases are less likely to outweigh normative concerns in the voting booth than they might be in a polarized country such as Venezuela or the United States.

More generally, our study suggests that scholars of autocracy should pay more attention to the democratic features of non-democratic elections. The neo-institutional literature on autocracy has made great strides by pointing out the autocratic functions of nominally democratic institutions. But in the midst of the neo-institutional revolution, scholars have continued to point out that these elections serve a democratic function as well. Studies suggest that they improve accountability (Miller, 2015) and that they provide legitimacy to the regime (Morgenbesser, 2017; Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009). Large parts of the electorate expect that elections will be democratic.

Finally, these findings also have important implications for how scholars study politics in Russia. This paper should serve as a reminder that demand for democratic institutions remains strong in

Russia. In a revealing analysis of Putin's *Pryamaya Liniya* call-in shows, Wengle and Evans (2018) note that Putin frequently touts the role of formal democratic institutions. The authors puzzle over why Putin seems to frame so much of his political discourse around institutions. Our account demonstrates why the performance is so important. Many voters believe in electoral democracy. Or at the very least, they behave as if they do. Thus, one of the reasons that elections are maintained in Russia is because voters support elections.[29] This is not to say that Russia is a democracy. It is not. But important parts of the electorate behave as if elections are democratic and expect them to be so. Analyses of authoritarian Russia would be remiss to ignore these voters. Understanding their behavior is key to understanding the stability of the regime.

We also provide insight into why the Putin regime goes to such great lengths to both hide and limit electoral fraud. After the 2011-12 election cycle, regime leaders made it clear to regional subordinates that they wanted future elections to be cleaner–or at the very least that the elections should be perceived as clean. The government spent over $800 million to install live-streaming cameras in electoral precincts in 2012, and then later appointed the former human rights ombudsman Ella Pamfilova to oversee the Central Election Commission. Available evidence indicates that election cycles since 2011 have been marked by less blatant election-day fraud.[30] The conventional explanation for this new emphasis on electoral legitimacy was that the regime wanted to stem the opposition protest movement that had erupted during the 2011-12 cycle. But our findings suggest another possibility. Regime leaders believed that their electoral base would evaporate if the curtain was pulled back on fraud. The scope of these efforts suggests that fraud could become a salient voting issue if voters were to find out about it.

We believe that such dynamics could be at play in other electoral autocracies as well. Our

[29]Note that this is different from arguing that the authorities hold elections because it is a procedural norm. The regime needs to limit fraud–or limit the spread of information on fraud—because faking elections has real costs in terms of regime support.

[30]GOLOS, "Statement about the Results of the September 18, 2016 Elections." Golos Movement, September 19, 2016

analyses in Appendix Table F2 show that regime supporters in countries as diverse as Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Nigeria all give their governments high marks for upholding democratic practices. Their support for the regime may be contingent on a belief that electoral integrity continues to be respected. This may be especially true in countries where autocrats initially won free elections and stealthily undermined democratic systems in order to hold onto power. Voters may believe that electoral results fairly reflect the autocrat's popularity, but may not be fully aware of the degree of malpractice being committed. Providing information about fraud could change their calculus of support for the regime.

Of course, such conclusions also come with caveats. These survey experiments are hypothetical and, while they suggest why new information can cause voter defections, the experiment cannot illuminate the conditions under which that happens. Our experiments can illuminate the ways that fraud impacts voter affect. They suggest that voters have a psychological reaction to fraud. But these experiments cannot be extrapolated directly to explain real world events. In the real world, information on fraud is contested and subject to perceptual bias. Thus, our experimental estimates may represent a higher bound for the effect of fraud on regime vote totals. On the other hand, the hypothetical nature of survey experiment may mute the reaction of respondents. Voters who learn about real candidates committing real fraud could be even more disappointed. Future research could profit by extending these analyses into real world settings.

In addition, our study cannot precisely quantify the net costs of engaging in fraud in the real world. Even if fraud costs autocrats votes by driving away supporters, the stuffing of ballots or rewriting of protocols adds to regime vote totals. The point of our paper is not to claim that the former must outweigh the latter, but just to demonstrate that the loss of votes is a real concern. Factors such as the presence of independent media and the competitiveness of the election are likely to affect this calculus. As we show in Appendix Section B3, regime supporters who rely heavily on state-sponsored news for information are more affected by the experimental treatment. In addition, a strong opposition not only has greater resources and the incentive to inform the public about any electoral fraud committed during election, but will also attract more support from

voters newly disillusioned with the regime's claims to be upholding free and fair elections.

Our study suggests some other avenues for future research as well. For one thing, there needs to be more work on how voters become informed about fraud. Our experimental intervention induced voters to believe that fraud had occurred. But in an autocracy with a partially closed media environment, it is difficult for voters to find out about electoral fraud. Social and independent media clearly play a role here (Reuter and Szakonyi, 2015), as do election monitors (Robertson, 2017). Less is known about how opposition activists can break through partisan biases to broaden awareness of fraud. The field seems to be moving in the right direction on answering these questions, but more work is needed.

We also know little about how the vote depressing effects of fraud compare to other types of unethical and socially undesirable behavior. For example, do voters punish candidates more for committing fraud than they do for engaging in corruption, committing a crime, or engaging in unpatriotic acts? Future research could advance the literature by benchmarking the vote depressing effects of fraud against other such issues.

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